

CHAPTER IV

MAINE'S FOOD ASSISTANCE CONNECTING ELIGIBLE SENIORS (FACES)

The Maine Department of Human Services (DHS)¹ was one of three grantees that selected an application assistance model for the FSP elderly nutrition demonstration. Partnering with a non-profit community action agency and a state university, DHS designed an initiative known locally as the Food Assistance Connecting Eligible Seniors program (FACES). Application assistants guided senior clients through the process of applying for food stamps, usually in the privacy of their homes. (One advantage of the program was that the assistants also were seniors and thus were in the clients' peer group.) By filling out food stamp applications, gathering the necessary paperwork that DHS caseworkers needed to determine eligibility, and submitting the documentation, FACES application assistants also helped seniors apply for other social service benefits for which they were possibly eligible, such as the state's Medicare buy-in program or utility assistance. In this way, the FACES program explicitly tried to encourage FSP participation by informally linking the program with other assistance programs.

OPERATIONAL DETAILS

Mechanics of Services

FSP services in Waldo County are characterized by the rural nature of the county. One DHS office in the adjacent county serves a four-county area. That office is located 30 miles from Belfast, Waldo's county seat, and up to 75 miles from the outlying rural areas of Waldo County. Under the demonstration, FACES staff provided application assistance, gathering and submitting relevant paperwork, linking seniors with additional resources, and

¹ Since the project ended, the Maine Department of Human Services has merged with another department and is now known as the Maine Department of Health and Human Services.

performing follow-up activities. Application assistants sometimes helped caseworkers with coordinating recertifications and issuing new EBT cards.

FSP Characteristics in the Absence of the Demonstration. During the past few years, Maine has attempted to simplify procedures for applying to the FSP. Since July 2001, specialized caseworkers have assumed responsibility for handling food stamps, Medicare/Medicaid, and TANF to streamline the application process for those seeking multiple benefits. DHS also designed a shorter food stamp application with larger print and waived the face-to-face eligibility interview for seniors.

Food stamp applications are available at the DHS office, as well as at hospitals, doctor's offices, and local Area Agency on Aging (AAA) offices. Clients also can request applications by telephone. Seniors typically submit applications by mail, through a proxy representative, or in person. After the initial processing of the application, caseworkers call the client to notify them of any outstanding paperwork (e.g., prescription receipts) and schedule an eligibility interview. Staff use DHS databases to confirm Social Security and Supplemental Security income, and most interviews last 10 to 15 minutes. About one-fifth of all enrollees apply on a walk-in basis, frequently meeting with a caseworker that same day.

To reduce the burden for seniors, Maine's recertification process is simplified. Elderly households with stable earned income must recertify once every 12 months. The period is once every 24 months if they have no earned income. Clients answer a series of questions either in writing or during a telephone interview with a caseworker, and then sign and return a form to the Rockland office.

Changes in FSP Policies and Procedures. The demonstration resulted in several changes to food stamp policies and procedures, but none that created a significant amount of additional work for DHS staff. Instead, FACES shifted many responsibilities associated with these incoming clients away from the caseworkers.

Application assistants took the lead in preparing FSP applications and collecting necessary paperwork during individualized sessions. Importantly, they also informed seniors about various community-based resources and benefits for which they might be eligible. First-time eligibility interviews were waived, and questions or concerns from the Rockland office frequently were resolved by FACES staff rather than by caseworkers contacting the seniors directly. Benefits were retroactive to the date that clients signed the application, as opposed to when the application arrived at DHS. This policy ensured that clients were not penalized for using application assistants as opposed to submitting the application in person, and it gained two to three days of benefits for individuals who would have mailed their applications had they not worked with the application assistants.

In addition, program staff began helping caseworkers with recertification about a year after operations began. Every six months, DHS forwarded a list of FACES clients whose recertification dates were approaching. Application assistants then called these seniors to remind them to sign and return the recertification form when it arrived in the mail from DHS. If a caseworker encountered a senior who had not mailed back the signed form—perhaps because they were confused by the paperwork—they occasionally asked an

application assistant to contact the client, arrange for a home visit to collect the form, and mail it to DHS.

When the state transitioned to an EBT system instead of traditional food stamps, clients' accounts would be deactivated if they did not use their EBT card for three consecutive months. Instead of closing such cases, DHS enlisted FACES staff to call these seniors and try to resolve any problems. For example, some EBT cards did not seem to be working properly, so for these cases, an application assistant reordered a new card and accompanied the senior when they used it for the first time.

FACES Service Delivery. In keeping with the underlying philosophy of facilitating the application process in the application assistance model, FACES staff delivered services wherever it was most convenient for clients. The easier that they made it to apply for food stamps, the more likely the elderly would do so. Application assistants typically worked with seniors in their homes, which offered optimal privacy. Sessions also took place in public spaces such as local senior centers. One assistant even reviewed paperwork with a client in his car.

Most sessions were comprised of two phases: the initial visit, and any follow-up activities. The initial home visit lasted approximately one to two and a half hours. Before services could be implemented, the application assistant had to obtain the person's trust. Staff wore jackets with the program's logo to give their task legitimacy, introduced themselves as someone from "Seniors Helping Seniors" to stress that they had come to help, and engaged the client in general conversation, allowing them to guide the discussion. Once the client seemed comfortable, application assistants determined if the applicants wanted to receive food assistance. The term "food stamps" was rarely mentioned, as it could trigger the stigma that the elderly often associate with the welfare system.

If the client expressed interest, the assistant began to record information on the FSP application, constantly stressing the program's confidentiality policy. FACES staff did an informal prescreening to see if the client was likely to be eligible for food stamps. (However, only DHS can determine eligibility.) The senior provided any pertinent documentation such as utility bills and Social Security payment receipts. Next, the application assistant asked if the senior was interested in learning about other benefits. She could either fill out any relevant applications and submit them for the client, or leave blank applications at the home. Benefits might be from DHS (e.g., the state prescription drug program) or from a community-based organization (e.g., the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program).²

² Programs to which seniors could be referred included Medicaid, Medicare buy-in, Maine Care (pharmaceutical program), the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, Meals on Wheels, Farm Share, transportation assistance, Health Watch (medical alert program), the Telephone Lifeline Program (phone bill subsidy), hearing benefits, The Right Information and Direction (or TRIAD, a safety, crime prevention, and victim assistance initiative for seniors), emergency energy assistance, and food pantries.

The FACES program coordinator designed a checklist that assistants used throughout the visit to ensure that nothing was overlooked. A copy, which also included the names and contact information for the FACES office and other benefits programs, was left with the clients.

The second wave of service delivery occurred after the home visit. If needed, application assistants collected any outstanding paperwork that caseworkers needed to determine benefit levels. For example, they might gather copies of receipts or bills from pharmacies, doctor's offices, or the water company. While this could entail a few hours of tracking down information, it was a critical step. Not only did it eliminate the burden to clients of obtaining this paperwork, but accurately documenting all expenses—particularly medical expenses—could, in some cases, significantly increase a person's food stamp benefit amount. Staff photocopied these materials at the FACES office and returned the original documents either in person or by mail. The program coordinator carefully reviewed each application for accuracy and resolved any issues with the application assistant or with the client by telephone. She then faxed the application to the Rockland DHS office and mailed the hard copy with supporting documentation.

Application assistants performed follow-up service activities as well. In some instances, they delivered fresh produce donated from the Farm Share program, ran errands such as picking up a prescription, or ensured that seniors could access emergency food assistance until their FSP benefits became activated. During the first year, FACES staff commonly called or visited each senior at least once each month, often developing a strong rapport with their clients.

Major Stakeholders and Roles

Three primary entities played important roles throughout the demonstration: the Maine Department of Human Services (DHS), the Waldo County Committee for Social Action (WCCSA), and the Institute for Public Sector Innovation at the Muskie School for Public Service at the University of Southern Maine. All three organizations provided expertise and guidance in the program's design, and the WCCSA delivered direct services to participating seniors.

Representatives from two divisions within DHS, the Bureau of Family Independence (BFI) and the Bureau of Elder and Adult Services (BEAS), conceptualized the overall structure of the FACES program. To supply peer application assistants, state officials turned to the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) within BEAS. This national program offers income-qualifying seniors the opportunity to secure part-time employment and learn new job skills. Caseworkers with the DHS Rockland office coordinated the receipt and processing of applications with FACES staff.

The WCCSA housed the demonstration's core program staff. A full-time coordinator oversaw the day-to-day operations of the FACES program and took ultimate responsibility for quality control. She mentored and supervised the application assistants, provided ongoing technical assistance, and reviewed all case files before submitting them to DHS.

The program coordinator was also in charge of outreach and community education and sometimes delivered fresh produce to new clients from Farm Share. Three part-time application assistants interacted most directly with clients. They helped seniors apply for food stamps and conducted follow-up activities, linked clients to other social service programs and community resources, and contributed to outreach efforts.

Staff from the Muskie School of Public Service in Portland were primarily involved during the planning phase of the demonstration, especially with writing the grant and designing and delivering the initial training for FACES staff. Still, the university continued to play an important advisory role throughout implementation. During the second year, it developed and maintained the FACES website, and delivered a follow-up training.

Management Structure and Lines of Authority

Stakeholders from the primary organizations served on an advisory board that has convened every month since Maine received the USDA grants. Members included the state food stamp director (DHS), the food stamp supervisor in Rockland, the BEAS manager of community programs, the SCSEP manager, the WCCSA transportation director, a manager from the Muskie School, and the FACES program coordinator once she was hired. The group initially met to design the demonstration, and continued to meet to discuss procedural and policy issues, address concerns, and offer guidance to FACES staff. While members arrived at decisions by consensus, the central DHS office in Augusta had ultimate authority over any policy or procedure that affected the FSP. Caseworkers continued to determine eligibility for all food stamp applicants, including FACES clients.

Organizationally, FACES fell under the umbrella of the WCCSA. While the agency's executive director officially supervised the program coordinator, the transportation director served as her de facto supervisor, as he was a member of the advisory board. The transportation director provided space and office supplies to program staff, and also acted as the liaison between FACES and the WCCSA's executive director and board of directors.

Means of Communication and Related Issues

Program officials maintained strong communication throughout the demonstration, which helped facilitate cooperation between FACES and the local DHS office. Scheduling monthly meetings of the advisory board ensured that stakeholders addressed issues and concerns as soon as possible. Both the program coordinator and local supervisor from Rockland served as board members, which enabled those in charge of operations for regular and demonstration FSP applicants to remain in regular contact. The coordinator also made a point of bringing her staff to Rockland to meet the caseworkers. While caseworkers initially were concerned that application assistants would try to determine eligibility, they realized soon after the demonstration began that DHS would retain complete authority over eligibility determination.

For the most part, relations between FACES and the local DHS office ran smoothly, although there was disagreement over who would be best to follow up with clients if a

problem emerged with their applications. Sometimes a caseworker called a FACES worker to obtain additional information or clarification from a senior. In other instances a caseworker preferred contacting the senior directly to save an extra step. For example, a phone call could resolve a discrepancy in household income more quickly than explaining the issue to an application assistant and waiting for her to call back with the information. (At least one caseworker—out of approximately 30—always contacted her clients who enrolled through FACES.) In contrast, the program coordinator insisted that FACES serve as the primary liaison with clients participating in the demonstration. Many seniors refused to deal directly with DHS because they felt more comfortable working with an application assistant. They also preferred to work with one familiar person instead of the Rockland office where cases could transfer between caseworkers, causing confusion as to who was calling them to ask questions.

Furthermore, the two offices criticized each other's productivity and efficiency. A handful of caseworkers reported that FACES staff submitted extraneous paperwork, and applications sometimes contained errors. When pressed, however, they indicated that only a small percentage of applications needed to be revised. Caseworkers also mentioned that FACES staff encouraged seniors to reapply after they had already been found ineligible for food stamps. Yet program staff said they only helped clients reapply if there had been a change in personal circumstances (e.g., if a spouse had died or medical expenses had increased). FACES staff reported that frequently they had difficulty reaching a caseworker when they had a question, and complained that the time it took to process applications increased during the second year.

Training

Many stakeholders agreed that training would be an important ingredient for the demonstration's success. Initial comprehensive training laid a solid foundation for the application assistants, which was complemented by weekly staff meetings, a refresher course, and additional specialized trainings.

Initial Training. The Muskie School of Public Service at the University of Southern Maine, one of the key community partners, designed and delivered a four-day session for application assistants. It based the comprehensive curriculum handbook (139 pages) on the handbook used to train new DHS caseworkers (also developed by the Muskie School). Topics included the goals of the demonstration, demographic data on Waldo County, an overview of USDA and the FSP, food stamp facts and myths, outreach strategies, EBT cards, confidentiality, and other benefits and community resources available to the elderly. The instructor stressed to the application assistants that they would not determine eligibility for food stamps and should never promise that applicants would qualify or offer an estimated benefit dollar amount. Participants received a field guide listing important points to remember that they could use while delivering services.

Weekly Staff Meetings. Since the initial training covered a lot of material, the program coordinator soon understood that regular reinforcement of the application assistance steps and FSP policies would be essential. Consequently, staff met every Tuesday

morning for three hours. Serving as a mentor for the assistants, the coordinator encouraged them to ask questions, listened to problems that emerged when working with clients, and helped them devise strategies and solutions for resolving issues. The coordinator also routinely reminded staff about certain details, such as the different types of verification paperwork needed. These technical assistance sessions helped the FACES workers build confidence and develop communication skills and professionalism, and imparted basic case management skills, such as getting a general sense of household income and expenses by quickly reviewing a bank statement.

Additional Training. The Muskie School sponsored refresher training in April 2003 that focused on the new EBT system in Maine. This session included hands-on practice with mock point-of-sale (POS) equipment.

The program coordinator also arranged for staff to attend several supplemental training sessions led by community groups. By the second year, application assistants had (1) become certified as Medicare educators, (2) attended a session on the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act as well as one-day sessions at the university's cooperative extension program on topics such as nutrition and diabetes, (3) received training on Alzheimer's disease and the state's new prescription program, (4) attended a county health expo in the fall of 2003 so that they could learn about new community health programs and services to which they could refer FACES clients, and (5) listened to invited guest speakers, such as a food pantry director, talk about topics related to food assistance and the elderly.

In addition, application assistants had the opportunity to engage in activities that would give them new skills they could use after the demonstration ended. With the advisory board's support, after the first year the coordinator set aside one hour each week during which staff could focus on professional development goals. One example included assisting the coordinator with administrative tasks related to FACES so as to learn computer and clerical skills. Some staff elected to spend more time each week on professional development, and also took free enrichment courses at a university branch campus.

Outreach Strategies

To educate potentially eligible seniors about FACES, staff launched a multi-faceted outreach strategy. They initially relied on making cold-call home visits; this was supplemented by written materials, community collaborations, mass media, and networking. Before the demonstration, FSP outreach consisted of a few community-sponsored initiatives. For example, in January 2002 the local AAA ran a public education campaign conveying the message that using food stamps would not make seniors ineligible for Meals on Wheels. The local DHS office had conducted only limited FSP outreach in the previous several years.

Core Themes and Target Audiences. Program staff emphasized three main outreach themes. First, they introduced the demonstration as "Seniors Helping Seniors." The message was easy to comprehend and capitalized on the notion that the elderly were more comfortable dealing with peers as opposed to government workers. Second, they

underscored the importance of being able to “Stretch Your Food Dollars” by participating in the demonstration. They mentioned food stamps as little as possible due to the stigma that the elderly often attach to DHS and public assistance. Third, they spoke about how good nutrition contributes to good health.

In determining how to prioritize which groups FACES would try to reach, staff initially cold-called several hundred seniors who received Social Security and Supplemental Security income but not food stamps, since they would be very likely to be income eligible. Then, the program coordinator began obtaining voter lists from town clerks in the county; this continued throughout the demonstration.³ While some residents would not qualify, these lists provided the most current data by home address and age group. Using this information, application assistants embarked on what many stakeholders likened to a grassroots political campaign, going door-to-door and speaking to seniors one at a time. Once staff targeted these two groups, word-of-mouth became a critical means of attracting interested seniors. The program coordinator estimated that 60 percent of clients came through referrals and 40 percent through canvassing. Referrals became more common during year two as more and more people heard about the program’s services.

Networking. While application assistants reached out to seniors by going door-to-door, the program coordinator frequently met with relevant individuals and organizations that could help spread the word about FACES. Before the demonstration began, she identified potential partners in the community to meet with to promote nutrition education among seniors, including the Maine Nutrition Network, the university’s cooperative extension program, the Salvation Army, Farm Share, the local AAA, sheriff’s offices, and food pantries. Many of these groups, including permanent program staff at the WCCSA, routinely referred seniors to FACES.

The coordinator also spoke to several local legislators so that they would appreciate the importance of the FSP for the low-income elderly population. In addition, she and the application assistants delivered several presentations about FACES, represented the program at community events, and tabled at a range of public sites (e.g., festivals, senior centers, grocery stores). Finally, the program coordinator participated in the Senior Community Coalition, a group of local AAA directors who began convening in 2003 to discuss how best to improve services for seniors.

Community Collaborations. The FACES program teamed up with community groups to promote the demonstration, which helped give it validity and underscored the importance of food assistance benefits for the elderly and those stakeholders concerned with the needs of low-income seniors. Several local partnerships grew out of these networking efforts with non-profits, schools, and service providers:

³ The coordinator contacted 21 out of 26 town offices in Waldo County within the first 12 months.

- Farmers participating in the Farm Share⁴ program delivered fresh produce to the FACES office on a regular basis, which staff then brought to clients' homes. The produce served as an important food resource until food stamp benefits became activated; it was especially important for diabetic clients. Application assistants also referred their clients to Farm Share directly so that they could contact a local farmer to receive \$100 of fresh produce, or get information about where in the community they could receive produce from a food bank or meal site.
- FACES and the Young Men's Christian Association co-sponsored a Thanksgiving dinner for all seniors in the community. The YMCA also provided produce to demonstration clients during the growing season.
- A local middle school selected FACES as its volunteer service project. Students were matched with seniors (clients participating in the demonstration) for regular activities and outings. By the spring of 2003, the program coordinator had matched nine pairs of students and seniors.
- Another local middle school donated excess produce to FACES from its greenhouse and garden project that supplements the school lunch program.
- The Maine Nutrition Network helped publicize the FACES program. In exchange, the program coordinator organized focus groups of the elderly on Senior Nutrition Day to collect information on how seniors in Waldo County learn about good nutrition, their eating habits, barriers to accessing fresh produce, etc. The two organizations also co-hosted a workshop on nutrition education and physical activity for seniors.

Written Materials. During the planning phase, the Muskie School of Public Service designed brochures, posters, and flyers that featured the FACES catch phrase "Seniors Helping Seniors." Application assistants distributed these materials to sites that the elderly frequent, such as senior housing complexes, grocery stores, pharmacies, local businesses, medical clinics, town clerk's offices, and food pantries.

Multi Media. To complement the other outreach strategies, the program coordinator attempted to maximize exposure for FACES through the local media markets. She designed a press release and disseminated it to local newspapers within the first phase of operations. Articles then appeared in county newspapers throughout the demonstration. The Muskie

⁴ Senior Farm Share is funded by the USDA Food and Nutrition Services Senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program. Eligible seniors (those at or below 185 percent of the poverty level) can contract with a local farmer to receive \$100 in fresh produce from farm surpluses each month. Seniors also can obtain fresh produce from local food banks and area agency on aging meal sites.

School produced a public service announcement that was featured during a local television news segment and also ran on television over the initial months. The school also designed and maintained the FACES website (<http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/faces>). The site contained an electronic version of the food stamp application, the PSA video, downloadable publicity materials and training curricula, FSP benefit guidelines, and links to other organizations and service providers for the elderly.

Staffing Turnover and Shortages

There was no turnover of core program staff, although absences became more frequent among the application assistants during the second year, due to illness or injury. One assistant suffered from a chronic, non-fatal illness that caused her to be out of the office for a few months. Another assistant broke her wrist and took a two-week leave. The disruption in services was minimized because the program coordinator filled in as much as possible.

Routine turnover at the Rockland DHS office—mostly from retirements—were minimal. Nevertheless, due to a stagnant economy, there was a statewide increase in agency program enrollments that coincided with a statewide hiring freeze; this combination placed a strain on caseworkers' workloads. In fact, it seems likely that their frustrations may have had more to do with staff shortages and the hiring freeze than with FACES, particularly during year two. During this period, FACES staff reported that it was more difficult to reach caseworkers and get responses to questions. At the same time, DHS staff may have been less patient with occasional errors found in FACES applications and extraneous documentation at a time when they were overwhelmed with higher caseloads.

Major Operational Changes During the Demonstration

A handful of changes took place during the demonstration to improve the quality of FACES services. These changes included instituting the prescreening of applications, scheduling weekly staff meetings, reducing the degree of followup with each individual client, and shifting outreach strategies. In addition, Maine transitioned from a paper-based to an EBT food stamp system.

Prescreening Food Stamp Applicants. Initially, FACES staff did not prescreen interested seniors and the approval rate from DHS was relatively low (approximately 55 percent). Consequently, the program coordinator and the Rockland supervisor developed broad guidelines for application assistants to use when collecting preliminary documentation. For example, they might inform seniors that they would be unlikely to qualify for food stamps if they had \$5,000 in a savings account. Importantly, assistants did not discourage seniors from applying if they preferred to proceed, although this rarely occurred. Once program staff implemented this step, the approval rate increased to about 80 percent within four months.

Weekly Follow-up Training. Soon after the demonstration began, the coordinator detected multiple errors when she reviewed food stamp applications before forwarding them to DHS. She concluded that it would be important to add weekly staff meetings to

incorporate regular reminders and technical assistance into the schedule so that FACES workers could learn and retain appropriate skills.

Reduced follow-up with clients. Originally, application assistants spent a fair amount of time conducting follow-up activities for new clients. While they usually needed two to four total home visits to ensure that a complete application was submitted, and that clients had sufficient alternative food resources, they sometimes would stop by to touch base with seniors to see how they were doing. Developing a good rapport with their clients and incorporating such a personal touch in their service delivery was a wonderful way to reach out to the elderly, particularly in a region where many residents keep to themselves. At the same time, the program coordinator recognized that as caseloads increased, time spent with clients already enrolled in the FSP translated into less time for delivering services and doing outreach to new clients.

As a result, the coordinator encouraged her staff to limit the number of follow-up visits, recognizing that they would still need two to four sessions. To help offset this reduction in follow up, she created a phone tree. Once FSP applications were submitted, the coordinator placed seniors on a six-week call-back list that assistants tracked with a telephone log. If seniors voiced any problems or issues, such as a request for more fresh produce from Farm Share, application assistants would respond. After six weeks, seniors officially rotated off the phone tree, though they could always call the FACES office with questions or concerns.

To supplement the phone tree, in May 2003 the coordinator enlisted a peer volunteer (also a FACES client) to maintain an additional, ongoing phone tree from her home. This mechanism essentially served as a social outlet similar to the house calls that application assistants previously had made. Seniors placed on the phone tree were identified by staff as those with medical conditions, who were shut-ins, or who felt particularly alone or insecure. The coordinator called targeted seniors from the volunteer's home to determine if they wanted someone to call and periodically check on them. If they expressed interest, the coordinator immediately introduced the volunteer over the telephone so that a certain level of trust could begin to develop. The volunteer made 10-minute calls once a week, although she called a few of the seniors who were most in need two or three times a week. She then called the coordinator each week to report on the previous week's telephone sessions to make sure that no issues had emerged. If FACES staff needed information from clients, the volunteer could intercede on their behalf (e.g., if the senior needed to be reminded to submit a recertification form). Her caseload was approximately 10 seniors at any one time.

Shift in Outreach Strategies. Cold-calling was the primary means of reaching out to potential clients when FACES began. However, staff later started using door-to-door canvassing and referrals instead, since these were better ways to establish trust with the elderly. A senior generally was more likely to consider FACES if an application assistant introduced herself in person or the senior was referred to the program through a trusted source. In addition, to save money, the FACES program discontinued using the PSA after the first few months because the program coordinator emerged as such an effective public relations spokesperson for the demonstration.

Statewide Transition to EBT Cards. Maine switched from a paper-based food stamp system to an EBT system, effective June 2003. At that time, it was one of three states that still utilized paper stamps. Once the EBT system became active, application assistants incorporated this into their service delivery, explaining how the cards worked and accompanying seniors the first time that they purchased items with the card if help seemed needed, although this occurred rarely.

DESIGNING THE DEMONSTRATION

Program Design

The primary goal of FACES was to increase enrollment of the elderly population in the FSP and retain seniors in the program once they enrolled through the use of community education, outreach, and a one-on-one peer assistance model. Multiple partners contributed to designing the demonstration, yielding a program that in the end required few structural changes.

Who Was involved and How It Unfolded. Maine's state DHS office, the grantee for this demonstration, selected Waldo County as the pilot site because it (1) was small and rural, (2) had a sizeable low-income elderly population coupled with low elderly FSP participation levels, and (3) was a convenient location for monthly advisory meetings for members from Portland and Augusta, the state capitol. The manager of community programs with BEAS coordinated initial program development with BFI and the Institute for Public Sector Innovation at the Muskie School of Public Service.

The state agency had specific reasons for working with each of its partners. DHS decided to involve the SCSEP within BEAS because the demonstration would offer an employment and training opportunity for low-income seniors as well as a built-in pool of job candidates from which to choose. The WCCSA was chosen as a partner because it had a history of collaborating with the SCSEP and a solid reputation as a community action agency since 1965. Finally, DHS approached the University of Southern Maine due to its proven experience with writing and obtaining grants, substantive content knowledge through the Maine Nutrition Network, and experience in training new DHS caseworkers. Researchers from Muskie wrote most of the grant, with input from DHS and the WCCSA.

Key stakeholders formed an advisory board to begin strategizing about program design and implementation components. After they hired a program coordinator (who became a board member) the group developed protocols for interfacing with elderly clients and DHS staff in Rockland, processing FACES applications, and outlining roles and responsibilities of program staff. In consultation with the advisory board, the coordinator then formulated an outreach plan that involved: contacting service providers for the elderly; designing a press release and PSA; and distributing brochures, posters, and flyers. The Muskie School also updated a training curriculum designed to be appropriate for FACES staff.

Changes to the Design in Hindsight

The FACES program might have benefited from a few modifications to its design. Stakeholders were unanimous that using the SCSEP to fill the application assistant position was central to the program's success, as elderly clients were more willing to trust people of their own age. However, many stakeholders felt that minor changes could be made. To help minimize challenges associated with older workers, such as missed work due to health problems and knowledge retention issues, program officials might consider hiring at least one 'younger' application assistant closer to 55 than 65 years old. While all application assistants performed relatively well overall, some advisory board members thought that a three-month probation period and a performance review would have helped ensure that these individuals were best suited for their positions.

Furthermore, in the judgment of the MPR evaluation staff, it might have been useful for the Rockland DHS office to have designated one or two caseworkers to act as point persons and handle all incoming demonstration clients. Such an approach would have helped streamline procedures and minimize communication problems between caseworkers and FACES staff.

COMMUNITY CONTEXT

Geography was a possible factor that could have influenced the program's implementation and elderly participation levels in the FSP. Waldo County covers a relatively large service area—737 square miles. Most residents lived anywhere from 30 to 75 miles from the Rockland DHS office. These distances were not necessarily a transportation barrier for FSP enrollment, since seniors could have submitted applications by mail and DHS could have administered eligibility interviews by telephone. Nevertheless, some clients indicated to program staff that transportation was a general barrier to applying for food stamps. Perhaps some clients preferred to apply in person and/or direct questions to their caseworker in person. Another potential distance factor was exposure to any community-based publicity efforts for the FSP. This was likely to be higher the closer someone lived to Rockland or a larger town.

PROBLEMS AND ISSUES THAT AROSE

Many challenges that the demonstration encountered could be reasonably expected of any new initiative. Program officials struggled with issues surrounding staffing and communication between FACES and the local DHS office.

Information Retention among Application Assistants

While the peer assistance model was an excellent foundation for this demonstration, it involved a significant amount of the program coordinator's time to ensure that application assistants retained details about FACES policies and procedures. Ongoing technical assistance sessions in weekly staff meetings, mentoring, and methodical reviews of each application were not a part of the original program design. However, this degree of quality control and oversight was critical, particularly since application assistants frequently had difficulties remembering basic FSP information. Moreover, they worked at a slower pace. The coordinator observed, however, that with her guidance, the staff became more effective at outreach and problem solving as the demonstration progressed.

Staff Absences

Understandably, application assistants took some leave time while working for FACES. Seniors participating in the SCSEP earn vacation time and can be expected to take a number of sick days. Yet the assistants also took longer absences due to extended illnesses and injuries. One worker missed a month during the first year for an operation. Another application assistant was out of the office sporadically over several weeks and then took sick leave; she expended approximately three months in leave time. During the second year, one assistant was absent for health reasons for several weeks, and another lost two weeks due to a broken wrist. The coordinator had ultimate responsibility for filling in when staff were absent, which translated into a somewhat reduced level of community outreach. Fortunately, some of this time was during the winter months, when service delivery declined due to inclement weather. However, there was not a formal part-time or temporary staff person to provide back-up FACES service delivery if needed.

Communication Issues Between FACES and DHS

From the perspective of the FACES staff, it was sometimes difficult for them and the demonstration clients to reach caseworkers in Rockland, particularly during the second year when staffing shortages were noticeably acute within the agency. From the perspective of DHS, caseworkers noted that applications contained errors—albeit infrequent and minor ones—and were accompanied by superfluous documentation, such as receipts for car insurance payments. Both groups disagreed over who should ultimately be responsible for directly contacting FACES clients to resolve issues with their FSP accounts. The fact that site visitors did not hear about communication challenges during the first site visit suggests that the hiring freeze and higher caseloads during year two might explain these tensions. Assigning one or two caseworkers to all FACES clients might have mitigated these circumstances.

SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES

FACES yielded multiple successes. The application assistance model helped seniors apply for food stamps in a more user-friendly environment. The demonstration linked

seniors with various benefits and resources apart from food stamps. Furthermore, all stakeholders commented on the high quality staff who implemented the program.

Navigating Paperwork

Accessing food stamps became a more user-friendly process under this demonstration. An unwillingness to deal with the paperwork associated with applying for food stamps historically has been a barrier to participation among the elderly. Seniors anecdotally reported that application assistants were friendly, patiently explained procedures and answered their questions, and took care of various details such as photocopying verification documentation, as well as completing and submitting applications. Even caseworkers conceded that many FACES clients probably would not have applied for food stamps on their own because they refused to deal directly with government workers.

Linking Clients to Multiple Benefits and Services

While not an original intention of the advisory board, stakeholders cited helping seniors access other social services as an important byproduct of the demonstration. Many of them referred to the application assistants as “lifelines for seniors.” As caseworkers acknowledged, FACES workers could deliver more comprehensive services because they met with clients one-on-one in their homes. The coordinator shared anecdotal illustrations of households that captured hundreds of dollars in benefits and resources. In addition to food stamps, the programs that FACES clients enrolled in most frequently included TRIAD, the state’s Medicare buy-in program, and LIHEAP. Other programs were Farm Share, and the state’s prescription drug benefit program.

Effective FACES Staff

Any well-crafted program is unlikely to flourish without capable staff to implement it. FACES had such a staff and in particular the strong leadership demonstrated by a dedicated, full-time program coordinator. She provided ample support and technical assistance to the application assistants. The weekly staff meetings, her careful reviews of all food stamp applications, and constant mentoring from the coordinator enabled assistants to deliver high-quality services to seniors. According to members of the advisory board, if the coordinator had not been such a hands-on supervisor or had worked only part time, it is quite possible that the application assistants might have forgotten procedural details, given incorrect information to clients, or generated higher error rates on FACES applications.

The program coordinator spoke highly of her staff, noting their compassion and commitment to helping seniors. She also praised members of the advisory board who met regularly and always offered ideas, feedback, and resources whenever possible. The coordinator observed that FACES would not have had much chance of success without such a supportive committee.

In addition, the coordinator employed an interesting strategy to make seniors as comfortable as possible when staff conducted outreach. As a long-time resident of Waldo

County, she personally knew many residents. Whenever possible, the coordinator assigned workers to certain households based on personalities (e.g., introverted versus extraverted). According to staff, this approach was a critical component in the demonstration's success, since matching personalities facilitated gaining the seniors' trust when they were first approached.